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ABSTRACT

This paper describes several learning laboratory program approaches to teaching students how to prepare for professional school admission exams. That these exams are true aptitude tests is a myth repeatedly deflated when students study for the tests and manage to score significantly higher on a second testing. Factors in addition to intelligence which can influence the outcome on these standardized tests are familiarity with the exam and type of question likely to be encountered; practice in taking a mock exam under timed conditions, since working speed is a vital consideration; and reduction of anxiety level. The skills tested tend to be in two general categories for most qualifying exams, verbal and math. Specific suggestions for teaching these skills, such as practice in working analogies, are given. A program offered by UCLA's learning skills center to prepare students for the Law School Aptitude Test is described. It consists of the following five parts: a trial test using an old LSAT examination, a seminar providing general information about the test, a demonstration of how to prepare for the test (recommended study guides are listed), a cases-and-principles workshop, and essay preparation tutoring. (MKM)

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Helping Students Prepare for Qualifying Exams

A Summary of WCRA Institute III

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Increasing numbers of students are seeking help from Learning Centers on preparing for professional school admission exams: Graduate Record Exam (GRE), Law School Aptitude Test (LSAT), Aptitude Test for Graduate Schools of Business (ATGSB), Medical College Admission Test (MCAT), National Teachers Exam (NTE), etc. Test makers and others have long perpetuated the myth that these are true aptitude tests which cannot be prepared for. This myth is repeatedly deflated when we have students who take an exam and don't do well the first time, but after a few months of assiduous effort, manage to score significantly higher on a second testing.

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Factors Influencing Performance

What are the factors in addition to basic intelligence, which can influence the outcome on these standardized tests? Familiarity with the

format of the exam and type of question likely to be encountered is very important. Taking a mock exam under timed conditions is often a helpful starting point for a student who wishes to check his strength and weakness. Working speed is a vital consideration. Some students are perfectionists and work very slowly. Hence a low score would indicate a time management problem rather than a lack of ability, since these are all timed exams. Anxiety level during the test is often a significant aspect inhibiting an individual's performance.

Skills Tested

The skills tested tend to be in two general categories for most qualifying exams, verbal and math. The verbal sections usually test a broad knowledge of vocabulary (facility with synonyms and antonyms), an ability to work logically with analogies and an ability to comprehend and interpret complex reading passages. Some people, especially those in the sciences, have had little experience with synonym or antonym excercises or analogies. Practice in these areas can help broaden the student's facility with language and promote better scores in reading comprehension as well as in the general vocabulary sections of the tests. It seems beneficial to encourage a long-term vocabulary development program stressing structural work with roots and prefixes as well as a one-word-a-day approach to mastering words in context. Several exams (GRE and LSAT) also include sections testing facility with English grammatical structure. Reading comprehension passages usually test student's ability to find main ideas and to draw inferences, so practice materials in these areas are often recommended.

The math sections of most of the tests require basic algebra, geom-

etry and simple computational skills. Brushing up on basic formulas is helpful here. However, the ATGSB and the LSAT require some sophistication with data interpretation on graphs and charts. Working speed is particularly important on these sections, and practicing sample problems seems the best way of improving speed and accuracy.

In addition to verbal and math skills, some tests require background in certain areas. For example, MCAT and DAT (Dental Admission Test) cover basic knowledge in chemistry, biology, and general science. MCAT also includes questions on physics. If students haven't had these courses recently, a systematic review of this material would be useful. General cultural information questions appear in some exams (MCAT, NTE) but because of a broad xcope which covers a wide range of information, historical and current, these sections are difficult to prepare for.

Program Approaches

Most preparation programs are designed to familiarize students with the test directions and question patterns in order to decrease anxiety level and increase self confidence. Working on sample materials seems to be helpful in doing that, and also, in developing accuracy and increasing working speed. Hints on exam strategy can also be useful. In addition, some learning centers (e.g. University of Texas at Austin) have special anxiety reduction programs focusing on techniques of positive thinking, relaxation, etc. The aim is not to give the student the edge on those that haven't prepared (though it usually does that) but to help the student maximize his own potential. A variety of approaches is used to accomplish this goal. Most are offered through reading or learning centers and range frome one-to-one individual counseling

sessions to group sessions and seminars. A few even offer longer courses.

Looking to the Future

Several issues were raised at the close of this institute which might stimulate further discussion on this topic. First, it seems there is still a need for more opportunities to discuss specific techniques and exchange more materials. Second, what about the evaluation of our programs? Most of us rely primarily on subjective feed-back to get an indication of usefulness. It seems that here is a fertile area for collection of more data to support our contention that we are really helping students. Third, what about the meritocracy we are inadvertantly perpetuating by offering such prograns? Is this an issue that deserves further philosophic exploration?

This is a new, developing gield for most of us, and we find it helpful to turn to our colleagues for new materials and ideas to strengthen and evaluate our programs.

The following is a list of panelists who are willing to share more specific information and/or materials:

ATGSB Carrie Walker, Learning Assistance Center, Stanford University

LSAT Idell Holburt, Learning Skills Center, UCLA

MCAT Percy Russell, Biology Dept., UCSD

GRE Conner Hall, Reading & Study Skills Lab., University of Texas

NTE or LSAT Mike Hardie, Student Learning Center, U.C. Berkeley

Math (all tests) Fred Hollander, Learning Skills Center, UCLA

The Learning Skills Center, UCLA, offers a program preparing students for the Law School Aptitude Test. This program began two years ago at the request of students and has developed with their cooperation and suggestions. Since September, 1974, attendance at one, two or all parts of the program has totaled 450.

Programs of this general type have been offered for years by private individuals or firms. The price for their services is high, $85--$225.00 for sessions ranging from sixteen to thirty hours. Students from a high socio-economic group know of these programs, and have the money and time to partake in them. The UCLA program is free and open to all regularly enrolled university students.

The program provides students with information regarding 1) the test's format, 2) the process of applying to law school, and 3) the opportunity to raise questions and share their anxieties with others.

The program consists of five parts. Students can participate in any one, or a combination of all five parts. Individual counseling is available for specific questions or problems.

It is suggested that the students enroll in groups in the following sequence:

1. Trial test - The Pre-Law handbook has an old LSAT examination. Copies of this exam are given under trial conditions. The students are able to correct their exam and thus they have immediate feedback as to their areas of strengths and weaknesses. They are able to diagnose their errors. Students are advised that it is not known if these scores correlate to actual LSAT scores.
2. Seminar - This program is presented in three hours. It provides information on the examination's format and scoring, and procedures

for applying to Law School. A twenty minute test is given so that students can sample the types of questions given on the exam. General and specific suggestions for taking the exam are discussed.

3. Demonstration - Specific suggestions are given for preparing for the test. Manuals and workbooks are shown and their use demonstrated. Recommended books are:

    a) Simon and Schuster, How to Prepare for the LSAT
    b) Barron, How to Prepare for the LSAT
    c) Simon and Schuster, Math Review
    d) Cowles, Math Refresher
    e) Joffee, Opportunity for Skillful Reading
    f) Senior Reading for Understanding kit, SRA
    g) SHA, Science Research Association, College Prep Level IV
    h) Strunk and White, Elements of Style

4. Cases and Principles Workshop - Students are grouped in two's or three's, given copies of Cases and Principles and told to read and talk about them and then look at the answers. It is suggested that they concentrate on the process of getting the correct answer.
5. Essay preparation - Suggestions for writing the essays required on the Law School application are given individually and in groups. Essays are reviewed.

There is no objective evaluation of this program's effect on LSAT score. Subjective evaluations indicate students feel the program is helpful; they have more confidence and less anxiety about taking the exam. Perhaps the most significant evaluation of all is that students are being referred to the program by friends and counselors. During September and January all groups were oversubscribed.

Learning Skills Center
UCIA
Idell Holburt
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